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**Feminists Act! Interview with Heather Booth**

***Please note that this interview was conducted by phone in February 2020, before COVID-19 affected most Americans. Given this, we did not discuss either a government or public response to the pandemic as part of our discussion.***

**Wikipedia describes** [**Heather Booth**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heather_Booth) **as “an American civil rights activist, feminist, and political strategist who has been involved in activism for progressive causes.” This seems like a massive understatement to us. Over the course of her prolific career as a community organizer and leader, Heather has been an active participant in the civil rights movement – with groups like the** [**Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Student_Nonviolent_Coordinating_Committee) **and as part of** [**Freedom Summer**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_Summer) **– as well as a founder/co-founder of such groundbreaking feminist networks and organizations as the** [**Jane Collective**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Collective) **and the** [**Chicago Women’s Liberation Union**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago_Women%27s_Liberation_Union)**. She is also one of the co-founders of one of the most well known training organizations for grassroots organizers, the** [**Midwest Academy**](http://www.midwestacademy.com/)**, and later helped establish the progressive organizing collective,** [**USAction**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USAction)**. In addition, Heather has served as a key staff person/advisor on numerous high profile Democratic political campaigns well as on the Democratic National Committee itself and also helped to establish the** [**Consumer Financial Protection Bureau**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumer_Financial_Protection_Bureau)**.**

**Heather generously took the time to talk to us here at Feminists Act! in February, when we asked her such things as about defining feminism, getting involved in (or starting one’s own) movements, and turning anger into action:**

**What does it mean to you to be a feminist? How do you define “feminism”?**

According to Heather, “I believe that all people should be treated with dignity and respect. All people should be able to have full opportunities in this world and reach for the best and most satisfying use of their time and their life as they wish. And I believe that that’s true for women and for men. [We live] in a society in which women are not treated equally, and are not always treated with dignity and respect, and are not often allowed to reach the highest and best use of their talents…that’s what makes me a feminist.”

Asked about the [Equal Rights Amendment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equal_Rights_Amendment), which she worked on with the National Organization for Women in the 1970s: “It’s important for women to be written into the constitution, especially one that was written to exclude people who didn’t vote: people who weren’t white, [people who weren’t] women. It’s important that women tie our struggles to those concrete victories that impact people’s lives so that they understand why it matters to them. It’s important to indicate, with the ERA, that what we also want is equal access to housing, education, jobs, equal pay, health care, determining when or whether [we] have children, being treated as full participants in society able to raise [our] own voice[s].” When we asked her about recent movement on passing the ERA, thanks to a successful vote in Virginia in January, she noted that this “came because of political organization that changed the balance of power. The fight for women’s rights is aligned with the fight for voter’s rights and needs to be aligned with others who want to have a more representative government.”

**You’ve engaged in so many groundbreaking social movements and actions over the course of your career –the civil rights movement, launching the Jane Collective, founding The Midwest Academy, political organizing on progressive campaigns and via community organizing entities. What advice do you have for others who are seeking to identify how and where \*they\* should take action?**

Per Heather, “There are so many areas in which we need action. It may be local: how people are treated in your particular school or if a workplace is giving equal service to people and hiring people at the highest levels as well as entry levels. It may be the state level: who is in the legislature, are the bills supportive of child care and expanding health care availability. It may be at the federal level: federal laws so that all states come into compliance with a national standard. Whatever the level, and whatever the particular issue, whether it’s health care, child care, family issues, workplace, cultural issues – there’s so much to be done.”

She continued, “What I think is most important for people becoming active is that you identify an issue that really moves you, [that] you’re passionate about. It may be because it affects you and your family or it may be because it affects others because how others are treated impacts me. And once [you find an] issue or area or group of people you want to work with, then it’s finding an existing organization if you’re just becoming active – or start your own. [You don’t have to] feel like you have to do it on your own. On your own, we can be powerful but we can also be powerful when we work with others. So find others who are working on an issue to gain from their strength and numbers as well as their experience if they’ve been working on it for a while. Or if [you are] starting an organization, find others who share your concerns. Find all the people who will care about this concern.”

She offered an example of this: “If it’s curriculum in a school, the people who care most might be students but teachers [also will likely] care [as well as] parents, educators from other schools, the public. Identify your core group, your allies, and [develop] ever widening circles. Then identify what you can do with these people: create visibility on [the cause], educate people on it, take a public stance, have a demonstration, get people out to vote to impact the issue, withhold services and say we won’t go to this store unless they change how they are acting, send out a message on social media. All of these activities – and others that may have been done before…or never done before – are good tactics as long as they help you build your base, help you persuade or influence the decision-maker. “

Once you have found your allies and fellow leaders, it’s time to determine your goals. Per Heather, “There are steps in the book – [The Midwest Academy book](http://www.midwestacademy.com/manual/) – [to help you] first identify an issue or concern you really care about and then figure out what you really want. [For example], in addition to raising the issue, [you should determine] what you concretely want so that you know when a victory happens. Then there are many steps to the victory: ‘women should be treated equally in the workplace’ might mean we want equal pay laws, we want child care so that they can go to work, we want health care, etc. Whatever the specific elements are, and [once you] know what you want, identify who can grant you what you want, who has the power. It may be an employer, a legislator, an elected official, a corporate leader, an administrator – whoever it is, you want to know who that person is, not just in general but who is the specific person and what is the background on that person and what do you need to do to influence, persuade, or force that person to grant [you] what you want. And what are they responsive to: voters, consumers of their product, media because it will impact them as someone who cares about voters or consumers.”

Lastly, she noted that you also need to “focus on building your own resources: what will it take to have this fight? Do you need staff, to rent an office, to get a bus, to have a microphone? Whatever elements [you need], there will be a budget so you [will also] need to raise money, get visibility and press coverage, [gather] intelligence and research. Once you have all of those elements together. and make a strategic plan, what will you say about this to persuade others? Your message, once you have it down, is something you want to say again and again. McDonald’s says it takes people seven times to see an ad to remember seeing it, let alone remembering what it said. All of this fits into a plan. Then, once you take action, evaluate [it] with the group: how did it go, was it fun, did we learn anything, did we win anything, what do we do next. Brief beforehand, [take] the action, then debrief. The social action happens by pulling people together around a shared goal, identifying what you want to change, and then constantly building that group with care – and with love at the center – as you build a community that is working to change the world.”

**Do you have any advice on when to join an organization or movement vs. when to start a new organization or movement?**

Heather responded that “mostly it makes sense to join [an existing organization] when there are ongoing groups doing effective work, you like the people, they are building a community you want to be a part of, and you can see that together they hare having an impact. Usually [you will want to start your own organization if] it’s an issue that no one is addressing or you think there are ways to be more effective or the existing organization [addressing the issue] isn’t a fun place to be. [Even] then, it’s worth going to the organization to see if they would take it on so you don’t have to build everything on your own. If they won’t take it on, then it may make sense to build it on your own. That’s how all of these organizations began themselves. But it takes a lot of effort, perseverance, resources, [and] time and you have to decide if you have that to give or if it makes more sense to join with others.” Overall, she noted that “it’s important to coordinate, if not integrate, efforts across organizations so typically [folks should] look for ways to build on what already exists. But we also always need new voices and new efforts that reflect [our] issues, wishes, and desires.”

**Another impressive element of your work over the years is the sheer number of issues you have tackled. I think some people today struggle with choosing which injustices to focus on first when so many of them require immediate action. How do you choose where, when, and how to get involved?**

Here is how Heather responded to this question: “First of all, some people decide to work on one thing forever. My husband worked with the same trade union for 43 years because he believed building an organization of working people, led by working people, to give them a voice and to advance the vast majority of America was so important [that] it was the main thing he did. He also was wiling to be there for other efforts. For me, I’ve worked on student issues, women’s issues, social security, taking on big banks, immigration reform, marriage equality, tax structure, climate change, and many more. They all seem important to me and I’ve had the privilege of being asked to be involved in these various efforts. I think it’s where your passion is, where there is an effective plan, where you have the time and resources to be involved a little or a lot. I take on one or a more of a small number of issues at any given time.”

She shared an example: “Both symbolically and practically, I carry my pussy cat hat with me in my bag in case I need to run off to join a demonstration up the street at the Supreme Court when there is a call to action and, if I can, I’ll show up. What’s even more important isn’t what you do for one event or one action or one day but [when] more is needed and you need to dedicate and focus for the long haul: building organizations, building deep, and building a community of people.”

Heather then described the importance of relationship building to organizing: “You want to partner with others [and take actions to make it clear that] you care about them: [ask them] what’s their story, how did they get involved, how [do they see] their story [as] tied to the story of others and what can we all do together. If someone doesn’t [get involved or participate in a meeting or gathering] at first, the response shouldn’t be ‘where were you?’ but ‘we missed you, what’s going on?’. You may learn [that] they were bored with the meetings or their family was sick or in an accident.” She continued, “These relationships help build what you need to know to build organization: understanding others’ interests, focusing on what others care about, how their interests [are] promoted, putting their names on the agenda so they have a space to speak at the meeting, [determining what] they want to learn [like how] to talk to the press so more can participate in the media, [learning if] they have a story that they can tell. [It’s critical that we] build power together and realize that the reason for organizing is that we’re stronger together. A goal in organizing is to engage and grow the organization and represent and/or involve more and more people so that their voices are also heard and their power is increased in order to win.”

**What are your thoughts on turning anger into action?**

According to Heather, “Emotions can be very powerful and anger can be an important power because there is abuse in this world and we should be justifiably angry when people are insulted, abused, [and] harmed, when there is discrimination, when people are treated as lesser. These [experiences] are infuriating and we *should* have righteous indignation and we should express that to let people know that this isn’t ok.”

She then said, “Love is also a powerful emotion and, as angry as we are about the abuses of the world, we should also feel and engage and organize on the love and caring we have for each other.” As she noted, “The anger can burn out if isn’t also partnered with love. And the love can wither and die if it’s not sparked to lead us to action against the abuses of this world around which we are rightfully angry.”

**Since we’re in an election year, what would you say are some of the most impactful things people can do to support the success of progressive candidates?**

Heather responded that, while young people have historically not voted in the same percentages with which they make up the population, “in 2016, youth voting *did* go up and we hope it will go up again. But first [we need to] make sure people are registered [so we need to] register young people.” She pointed out that there are many organizations doing the important work of youth voter registration like the [Future Coalition](https://futurecoalition.org/) and that it is “important to connect with them.”

She also remarked that it is “important that there is education so that people know what the candidates really believe.” This includes local candidates; she recommended asking them “how they respond to the issues you care about.”

She continued, “Then there is protecting the vote, making sure that votes are not stolen or [that people are] frightened off from voting or that the vote is counted accurately. Then [there is] the vote itself: making sure people get out to vote. [People looking to work on elections] can get involved with a candidate…[or] consider whether *they* should run for office.” She pointed out that, for women, there are now some remarkable organizations providing guidance and support to candidates (she’s on the executive committee for [EMERGE](https://emergeamerica.org/) which trains women via a yearlong process to run for office). She continued, “there’s [Emily’s List](https://www.emilyslist.org/), [She Should Run](https://www.sheshouldrun.org/). There are also groups that address different communities: black women, Asian American women, [and others], encouraging them to run, to take action, to register others, to educate, to get them out to vote, and to protect the vote.”

**One thing we always try to do well at Feminists Act! is to amplify existing voices, organizations, and resources, especially from and by folks who are underrepresented, oppressed, or marginalized. What are your recommendations for people to follow on social media, articles to read, organizations to know, etc.?**

Heather offered several great recommendations: “First of all, there are [places where] people can be trained to learn [organizing] skills and one is the [Midwest Academy](http://www.midwestacademy.com/).” She also mentioned “groups that are promoting change and elections and voting,” including [MoveOn](https://front.moveon.org/), [Indivisible](https://indivisible.org/), [Swing Left](https://swingleft.org/), [Sister District](https://sisterdistrict.com/), and [Democracy for America.](https://www.democracyforamerica.com/)

She then discussed groups specifically focused on women’s issues, like [Supermajority](https://supermajority.com/), [NARAL](https://www.prochoiceamerica.org/), [NOW](https://now.org/), and [Feminist Majority](https://feministmajority.org/) as well as noted the importance of connecting with local groups in your own community or state.

Next up were books. Heather recommended, “[The Midwest Academy book](http://www.midwestacademy.com/manual/), books on a variety of movements, on the civil rights movement (Taylor Branch has a book designed as a high school version called ‘[The King Years](https://taylorbranch.com/king-era-trilogy/the-king-years/)’), Howard Zinn’s ‘[People’s History,](https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/peoples-history-of-the-united-states)’ and how people have made history when they organize. In the women’s movement, [there is] ‘[The Feminist Memoir Project](https://www.indiebound.org/book/9780813539737)’ about people in the early women’s movement. [There are also excellent books on] immigration reform, climate change, every issue.” Heather also shared that there is a movie that was made about her life that may inspire folks to take action; it can be found at [www.heatherbooththefilm.com](http://www.heatherbooththefilm.com) and watched on Amazon or downloaded from the site. She also mentioned a powerful poem by Marge Piercy called “[The Low Road](https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/piercylowroad.html),” which describes the power of people coming together to create change, as an inspiration.

She then took a moment to reflect on where we are in history: “Thinking about this moment, this is both a frightening and perilous moment and an inspiring and very heartening moment. It’s frightening because so many of the victories won in the past are being threatened and so many crises seem to be coming to an extreme point: the climate crisis, the pushback on civil rights, pushback on women deciding when or whether to have a child, pushbacks on healthcare, voting, democracy itself. It’s very perilous. But it’s also a period of inspiration because so many people *are* taking action. Young women are looking for ways to be active and *are* active and often it’s young people, often young women, who are teaching us: Greta Thunberg, Alicia Garza with [Black Lives Matter](https://blacklivesmatter.com/), [United We Dream](https://unitedwedream.org/) and the DREAMers. In addition to [this] action, we need to make sure there is a plan for winning and then building for concrete change that will last not just for a day or a year but for generations. Protest needs to be involved [and] the building of power that can endure.”

**Any parting words of advice for the Feminists Act! community?**

Per Heather, “The main lesson I’ve learned is that, if we organize, we can change this world. But we need to organize.”

**Thank you so much for your time, Heather, and for your extraordinary lifelong work building and sustaining a fairer, more progressive, more inclusive America!**